NEW YORK TIMES MAGAZINE
JUNE 27, 1965

[redacted]

STATINTL

The Loneliness Of Kwame Nkrumah

By J. KIRK SALE

AFTER two years they have now almost completed the wall around Flagstaff House, and once all the bars are in place and the gates installed the official headquarters of the President of Ghana will be a fortified 200-acre island in the middle of Accra. Behind three separate gates manned by armed guards Kwame Nkrumah will be able to look out over a private enclave that includes a battery of offices, an army camp, a military hospital, a radio station and his own personal zoo.

Flagstaff House tells much about the incredibly complex and indelibly fascinating personality of Kwame Nkrumah, Ghana's unquestioned leader for the last 15 years and one of Africa's most important figures. It reflects most obviously the single-minded concern for security of a man who has every reason to be afraid, since the political opposition he has driven underground has burst to the surface in two assassination attempts in the last three years. He seldom leaves the Flagstaff fortress, and then either without any warning or with hundreds of police and soldiers guarding his routes. On a trip last year to the port city of Tema, 20 miles away, the route through the capital was lined by guards stationed 50 feet apart and the open highway cluttered with armored cars and police cruisers.

Nkrumah's home is almost as well-guarded as his office, though he usually spends less time there. It is in a remodeled 17th-century castle on an isolated promontory overlooking the Gulf of Guinea, and to the earlier fortifications a high protecting wall has been added in recent years. Last year, after an assassination attempt within Flagstaff itself, Nkrumah burrowed himself there and made it virtually unapproachable, with a dozen policemen guarding the entrance road, two small tanks lined up against the wall and a gunboat of the Ghana Navy cruising in the harbor.

I once drove up as far as the front gate while taking a visiting American on a sightseeing tour of the city, but at the wall a rifle-wielding soldier roughly turned us back and told us sternly that it was forbidden even to look at the castle. A group of Western newsmen who did manage to fast-talk their way past the main gate so upset Nkrumah that he

J. KIRK SALE has reported from Africa for several newspapers and was for a year (1963-64) a lecturer in history at the University of Ghana.

Continued

had them clapped into jail — from which, incidentally, they managed to fast-talk their way out the next day.

NKRUMAH'S fear has led him to some extreme lengths. He distrusts both those nearest him—he is said to have shot a bodyguard with his personal revolver one jumpy day last February — and those farthest away, who are more suspect because less under watch. Passing around copies of Andrew Tully's spies-under-the-bed book, "C.I.A. — The Inside Story," was harmless enough, but he began to see C.I.A. machinations everywhere and to suspect all Americans on principle. Once he warned civil servants that they should stay away from those subversive cocktail parties at the American Embassy, and his puppet press even attacked "those Peace Corps spies, spies and saboteurs." He deported three absolutely innocent Americans from the University of Ghana on charges of "treasonable activities" which he never even tried to prove, and refused to listen to anyone who pointed out the absurdity of his accusations.

Flagstaff House also reflects the isolation of a man imprisoned by such fear. Its walls have served not only to protect him, but, in a deeper sense, to cut him off from the raucous, rhythmical world that is Accra and the common people whose life was once his own. Outside, on the broad macadam of Independence Avenue, passes a panorama of Ghana: "market mammies" with basins of fried fish impossibly balanced on their heads; members of the W.P.A.-style "Workers Brigade" clapping hands (the Ghanaian equivalent of the raised thumb) for rides; bikes, buses, Volkswagens and Mercedes-Benzes — in ascending order, the transportation status sybols for Ghanaian workers — carelessly and loudly weaving past the white-jacketed traffic cop at the main gate; "mammy wagons," unbelievably ramshackle trucks whose wooden sides bulge with passengers and produce, clattering to the market. Inside, Nkrumah sits alone at a broad desk in a quiet, air-conditioned room.

Nkrumah's public appearances are rare and he usually chooses to communicate to his people through the press and radio; for any major pronouncement he uses not the public platform but the radio station within his walls. Few visitors get to see him and often his own advisers are kept away by his camp of secretaries; those who are likely to prove bothersome, like a delegation of disgruntled chiefs or non-Communist Western reporters, never get beyond the first gate. His personal life is kept almost completely shrouded; when his wife gave birth to their third child, the fact went unreported and publicly unknown for three months.

It is no accident that a zoo occupies a central spot at Flagstaff House, for as Nkrumah has increasingly isolated himself he has increasingly turned his attention to the animals around him. His menagerie now includes baboons, leopards, kangaroos, a hyena, a hippopotamus and two gawky camels, said to be a gift from Nasser, which can often be seen grazing on the sparse fields opposite the main gate. Those who have visited him recently report that often the only real excitement and liveliness he displays is when showing off this collection.

"The Nkrumah way: ideology over practicality, illusion over reality, whatever the results."

Nkrumah has always been a lonely man. He was an only child, very close to his mother, in a society where large families are almost universal; he once wrote that "my happiest hours were spent alone. I used to wander off on my own for hours on end." At school he hated the regimentation of military drill and shunned team sports in favor of solitary running (and since his best efforts were at 220 and 440 yards, one Accra wag has since referred to this as "the loneliness of the short-distance runner"). During his difficult life in the United States in the thirties, cut off from home and family, he lived an almost pathetically isolated existence which he later described as producing "a most haunting feeling of loneliness."

Once back in Ghana and absorbed in the life of a politician, Nkrumah had little opportunity for solitude, but found that in many ways his 10 years of Western training separated him from the traditional life around him. He worked long hours and made it a point to withdraw for a week or two, once "to a quiet spot a hundred miles or so out of Accra in order to meditate." After his political position was secure—around 1960, when he was elected President of the new Republic of Ghana—he was able to turn more and more from being an active public figure into a secluded administrator. And today, behind his walls, he leads an existence very much alone.

UNDERSCORING Nkrumah's loneliness in the last few years has been his lack of male companionship, on the level of either friend or adviser. So many one-time friends have turned against him for one reason or another that he now seems reluctant to send out the tentacles of friendship to anyone. Ako Adjei, whom he had known and trusted since his days in America and who had been Foreign Minister in several of his Cabinets, was found guilty this year of plotting to kill Nkrumah; Tawia Adamafio, former party leader and once the man closest to Nkrumah, was sentenced in the same plot; Komla Gbedemah, who engineered Nkrumah's first election and was a successful Finance Minister for many years, was kicked out of the Government in 1961 and later accused as the instigator of an attempted overthrow; and the list could go on.

All of this has made Nkrumah naturally suspicious about those he allows close to him, and one reason that he now works up to 20 hours a day may be that he is reluctant to trust anyone else with his burden of work. It is interesting that of those closest to him personally today—the three B's, Defense Minister Kofi Baako, personal troubleshooter Geoffrey Bing and

Continued

radical-left columnist H. M. Basner—the first is in poor health and the last two are whites with no chance to form a rival power structure, men from whose friendship, in short, there is no threat.

For some men, women might supply an outlet for loneliness, but not for Nkrumah. He has always been afraid, he has said, "to become too entangled with a woman," and even from his earliest days, he confesses, "my fear of women was beyond all understanding," a feeling "I have never outgrown." His closest attachment was to his mother—he reports that as a child "I used to be angry when my father came to sleep in our bed.... I told him that I was also married to her and it was my job to protect her"—and apparently no one has been able to take her place.

Today he is married to an Egyptian, Fathia Ritzk, but it was from the beginning a marriage of convenience rather than love (he probably had not even seen his bride before they got married) and it is doubtful that she shares enough of the Ghanaian experience or the political passion to be very close to Nkrumah.

ONE substitute for the lack of personal friendship may be the animals in his zoo, who can be releases for a feeling Nkrumah dares not share with those around him and cannot share with the public, but of course this is not enough. A more effective and pervasive substitute is friendship in the abstract rather than the particular—that is, public adulation, on which Nkrumah seems to thrive.

He has no hesitation in having the party papers refer to him as "His Messianic Dedication," "The Nation's Pillar of Fire and Fount of Honor" or simply "The Leader"; his speeches on Radio Ghana are preceded with as much as 15 minutes of traditional "praise-singing," a privilege once reserved for chiefs alone. When a slight earthquake shook Accra on the day Nkrumah announced his new Seven-Year Development Plan, The Evening News report ran:

"After the Messiah had launched the people's program to build a socialist state . . . THE EARTH TREMBLED AND THE TREES SHOOK, THE WIND BLEW AND THERE WAS RAIN in Accra which had not seen a drop of water for a long time. . . . The second Messiah has arrived. Ye know not when he cometh, says the Bible, and we say to the world that HE is here."

And this is not extraordinary; it is daily fare. Such "unsober adulation," as one Ghanaian intellectual wrote last year, "may unintentionally cut off the President from the people," thus increasing the isolation it is intended to overcome. But in the short run it seems to provide Nkrumah a very welcome manifestation that the people of Ghana are his friends (not to mention worshipers) en masse even if they so often turn out to be his enemies individually.

The intermingled fear and isolation, the one breeding the other, form an essential part of Nkrumah's personality. In turn, they reflect what is perhaps the essential key to unlocking this complex man: his consistent self-centeredness, self-absorption, egotism — what in psychological terms might be considered narcissism.

The evidence to support a diagnosis of Nkrumah as narcissistic is not, of course, conclusive, but signals such as these occur too frequently to be overlooked.

An inordinate attachment to his own ideas. Nkrumah has continually thrust his own ideology on his country and the world in five turgid books, in half a dozen polemical newspapers, on his powerful broadcasting station—and has done this even knowing it has alienated many of his followers, angered many of his fellow leaders and offended many of his creditors.

A supreme conviction in the rightness of his actions. Nkrumah has always believed religiously that his way was the only way, a feature very effective in gaining supporters in his fight for independence, and neither bombs, betrayals nor abuse have shaken him; last year, for example, when moving to take over the University of Ghana, he blithely ignored even Conor Cruise O'Brien, then Vice Chancellor and one of his own appointees, who suggested that his action was improper.

An acute sensitivity to any kind of criticism. Nkrumah has found criticism so distasteful that he has eliminated the political opposition, reorganized the Legislature so that detractors can't lift their heads and clamped full control over all domestic news media and occasionally over foreign imports as well; he led a violent campaign last year against "rumor-mongers" who were said to be telling tales about him behind his back. In March one poor taxi driver was jailed for three years for passing on a rumor to his back-seat passengers, who happened to be high-ranking military men.

An unrelaxing desire to mold reality to fit his precepts. Nkrumah has sought to change what his ideas cannot admit of and has refused to admit of what his power cannot change. He has actively supported left-wingers throughout the continent in hopes of proving that Africa is really socialist at heart, and at home he allows his papers to make up news and montage photographs that will match his preconceptions. Two years ago he decided that all drivers should immediately switch to the right-hand side of the road as a move of solidarity with the former French states around him, and only a last-minute burst of rationality halted the campaign and saved the lives of thousands.

A continual need for public reaffirmation of his value. Nkrumah has encouraged not only adulation from the press but sycophancy from those around him, and has held a steady stream of elections and referendums as evidence that he is really popular. His own words betray this need: "It is essential," he announced in 1962, "that once every five years [the people] shall have the opportunity to *renew* their faith and confidence in the party and its leader" (my italics).

IN view of such recognized symptoms as these, then, it does not seem too much to see Nkrumah as an example of a narcissistic personality, providing that this is understood as analysis and not condemnation. And what should we expect of such a personality? In Erich Fromm's words, a narcissist "has to increase his power, his ruthlessness and his narcissism." Nkrumah has done exactly that.

Since 1961 Nkrumah has increased his power steadily and relentlessly. He has taken over full executive direction of the all-powerful Convention People's party, of which he is life president, assumed full command of the armed forces, removed all possible political rivals from his inner councils, outlawed the opposition United party and jailed its leaders, made the legislature into a rubber stamp (in fact, he has ordered M.P.s to find outside jobs because there is not enough to keep them busy in the legislature), purged police and army ranks of possible dissidents, clamped absolute authority over all weapons of propaganda, given himself veto power over top-level judicial decisions, and taken control of university education. Today Nkrumah reigns supreme.

He has also increased his ruthlessness. He has passed a steady series of harshly punitive laws allowing him to jail opponents up to 20 years without trial or appeal; used them to jail more than 100 (some even say 1,000) suspected dissidents including professors and students, used police interrogation and house arrests to cow both friends and foes, stationed soldiers with automatic rifles to guard key locations such as banks and communications centers, openly threatened military action against anti-Government demonstrations, condoned an uncontrolled mob invasion designed to intimidate university students, allowed party hacks remarkable freedom in bullying recalcitrant judges, Middle Eastern entrepreneurs and hesitant schoolmasters, and used courts at all levels to enforce executive orders.

In part, of course, Nkrumah has been forced to such harshness because of the threat of subversion, but his ruthlessness grows within a vicious circle common to many au-

Continued

thoritarians: fearing those he oppresses, he oppresses those he fears.

Finally, there is what can only be described as Nkrumah's growing sense of unreality. It explains his inability to have close friends, his belief in his own rightness, his acceptance of "unsober adulation," his drive to remake Africa in his own image.

He has always been without the day-to-day balances that provide incursions of reality in other men—he has no hobbies, eats very little, drinks and smokes not at all. He has always plunged headlong into his fantasies, first his games, then his religion, later his nationalism; Peter Abrahams once reported that "he seemed consumed by a restlessness that led him to evolve some of the most fantastic schemes." And today fear, isolation and a growing authoritarianism have worked to place Nkrumah in a special world of his own, not quite connected with the real world outside his private palaces.

There are certain links with reality, of course, even beyond those common to every mortal man: his fear seems reasonable since there are in fact those who want to kill him; his isolation seems realistic as a way to preserve himself and his great works; his absorption of power seems reasonable, since everyone in the nation keeps telling him it is. Which is to say that there is a sufficiently realistic basis to Nkrumah's unreality to keep him on this side of sanity and to make him quite a different figure in degree from an Egyptian pharoah, say, or Hitler.

But his unreality is unmistakable, and it is clearest of all in Nkrumah's excessive attachment to his own ideology, an attachment that leads him to some of the most senseless moves. He has set up something called the Kwame Nkrumah Institute of Ideology, formed ideological "study groups" and started two propaganda newspapers, all of which concern themselves day in and day out with whatever Nkrumah has thought or is thinking.

He has also recently formed a committee to insure "ideological purity" in the land by purging libraries and bookstores of publications which do not conform to the "Nkrumahist" ideology. Now, of course, there are not going to be many volumes left in the Accra Public Library if this last move is seriously pushed—and it seems that it is being—but this only points up the depth of Nkrumah's unreality, for when the ideological steamroller runs up against the realistic mountain, it is the mountain that must give way or be run over.

Nkrumah's decisions today are based not so much on practical necessities as on ideological commitment; not on what actually *is* but on what ideologically *should be*. It is not too much to say that if Nkrumah were given the choice between ridding Ghana of all its ills on practical lines in a decade or on his own rigid ideological lines in three, he would unhesitatingly choose the latter. Such is the depth of his commitment.

There are three major examples of how in recent years ideology has won over practicality.

First, the ideology not only proclaims the necessity and rightness of Socialism but demands a unity of purpose among Socialist (i.e., Communist) countries. Hence Ghana has embarked on extensive trade agreements with the Eastern bloc, not because she wants Eastern goods (very few Ghanaians care for the hot Czechoslovak shoes or unpalatable Chinese pigs' knuckles that now crowd Accra's stores) and not because she finds the East a profitable trade partner (the Communists have so far failed to make good on $5 million worth of commitments) but primarily to back up her ideological identity with the East by economic connections. The result has been that Ghana's industries and agriculture have been withering for lack of supplies, her consumers have been deprived of many common Western imports and faced with rationing of still others, and her finances have plunged to the point that she is in debt by perhaps as much as $800 million.

Second, the ideology holds that "capitalism is but the gentleman's method of slavery" which uses "the cajolement, the wheedlings, the seduction and the Trojan horses of neo-colonialism" in undeveloped countries "to subordinate their interests to those of a foreign power." Hence Ghana has turned away as much as possible from the capitalist nations on which it would logically depend for foreign trade and economic assistance. The United States is continually depicted as putting bombs in the hands of Nkrumah's enemies, Britain is assailed for every real and imagined ill affecting its former colony, West Germany is castigated as a "running dog of imperialism." It is little wonder that when Ghana went around last month secretly soliciting desperately needed funds from these countries it was given the cold-shoulder at every stop. Yet there is no suggestion that Ghana has any intention of giving up its ideological barrage in order to get economic sustenance.

Lastly, the ideology holds that a tight "Union of African States" under a Socialist banner is essential and that "we shall never relax our efforts to bring total independence and unity to this African continent." Yet Nkrumah's African Affairs Bureau has steadily alienated most of the continent's leaders with its free-wheeling interference (with anything from propaganda to guns) on behalf of left-wing causes even in sovereign nations; his "freedom fighters" village on the outskirts of Accra has provided a haven for all kinds of leftist dissidents kicked out of other countries; his insistence that "Africa must unite," pursued with all the subtlety of a jackhammer, has angered such realistic leaders as Julius Nyerere, President of Tanzania, who last year told him bluntly to mind his own business. But Nkrumah's ideology does not make allowances for any business in Africa not being his, nor does his mind appreciate the difference between persuasion and meddling.

And so it goes—ideology over practicality, illusion over reality no matter what the results.

THE latest demonstration of Nkrumah's obsession with ideology, and consequent departure from reality, has taken the form of a little book published last spring (and almost totally ignored in this country) called "Consciencism," a "philosophy and ideology for decolonization and development, with particular reference to the African revolution."

This book was pushed on Ghana with all the propaganda weapons available to the state, and they are considerable: mass meetings, public speeches, front-page news reports, lengthy (and impenetrable) commentaries, full-page advertisements, broadcasts and discussion groups—all running on for weeks. All of it seemed an acute example of loss of balance, especially since not more than 5 per cent of the country was able to read the incredibly complex prose and not more than 1 per cent was able to make any sense out of it.

"Consciencism" itself is never really explained—in fact, it is nowhere defined nor is any attempt made to reveal whose conscience is being talked about—but it seems to be an ideology mixing all those things Nkrumah holds dearest, whatever they may be. It somehow combines, without ever explaining just how, whatever Nkrumah chooses to mean by "Socialism"—materialism, humanism, egalitarianism, love-thy-neighborism, "communalism in modern dress," "traditional African society" and much more—with whatever he found valuable in winning independence—mass party, elite vanguard, mass propaganda.

Continued

cum - education, "positive action," authoritarian control, etc. Throw all these together, stir with long words and philosophical gobbledygook, and comes "Consciencism."

In a way, the book partakes of the very unreality that inspired it. "Consciencism" holds that "matter has an original power of self-motion," "the fundamental law of evolution is dialectical," that "space must, to the extent that it is real, derive its properties from those of matter" and that with its principles "the mind-body problem is solved."

The last chapter is almost undecipherable and its unreality suggests that whoever concocted it might be certifiably insane. Here the problems of all societies (especially colonial ones) are solved through symbolic logic: "Let *Pa* represent the positive action in an individual," "Let *cg* represent philosophical consciencism as elaborated by the conditions of *g* and the experience and consciousness of its people," and so on in bewildering variety. Then it is but a simple Einsteinian task to see that "therefore a general formula arises thus:

$$S \longleftrightarrow m + C + D + UGi"$$

or "hence the progressive union of liberated territories, for example, a union of African states, might be . . . represented . . . more analytically:

$$U\ G_{pa\ 1\ \ldots\ k} \longleftrightarrow [(pa+na)+(pa+na)+(pa+na)+(pa+na)Gk]."$$

$$OG1 \quad OG2 \quad OG_{k-1} \quad O$$

It makes no better sense in context than out.

At this juncture it seems futile to try to foretell what the deep and chaotic personality of Kwame Nkrumah will mean for Ghana in the years ahead, for it is in the nature of such a soul that it is irrational, uncertain, unpredictable.

Ghana today is, in a very real sense, a product of this complex personality. The cocoa farmer, whose crop forms Ghana's only major export, depends for his existence on the decisions Nkrumah makes as to whom to trade with; the secondary-school student in the bush village, whose talents are earnestly solicited to build tomorrow's nation, depends for his future on the content Nkrumah chooses to give the universities and on the opinion of the local party officer; the civil servant in the Accra office, whose skills are required to develop the minerals and build the factories, depends for his job on the projects that occur to Nkrumah's craggy mind and his willingness to accept them unquestioningly. Over the entire country, from the seas to the savannah, on its economy, its politics, its society, the long shadow of Nkrumah is cast.

It may be that his unreality will be adjusted, his vision cleared—but just now it seems likely that the land must endure more and more of his vagaries. And that will spell a sorrow for Ghana of which the man behind the walls of Flagstaff House may never be aware.